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**Visiting Mum: children's perspectives on a supported scheme when visiting their mother in prison.**

**This article reports the findings from a qualitative study evaluating a Visiting Mum scheme that supported Welsh children with a mother in prison. There are 12 women's prisons in England, and none in Wales. Women living in south and west Wales are currently incarcerated at HMP Eastwood Park, Gloucestershire. This is significant for Welsh children, as journeys to the prison are extensive and costly. This article focuses on the rarely heard experiences of the children when visiting prison. We ran focus groups with 12 children utilising innovative, participatory and creative methods. The findings reveal a hidden population of children who suffer disproportionately as a result of their mother's incarceration but who were effectively supported by a service which helped to sustain mother-child relationships during their mothers' imprisonment.**

## **Introduction**

In the UK, around 17,000 children have a mother sentenced to custody every year (Prison Reform Trust, 2018). Under the European Convention on Human Rights (to which the UK is currently still party) a custodial sentence deprives the child of parental care and thus interferes with their right to respect for family and private life (Article 8). Over the past 20 years, there has been mounting evidence that separation from children has devastating effects on women in prison, and that maintaining positive family contact is crucial for both mothers and children (Farmer, 2019; Kincaid, Roberts & Kane, 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2018). Despite this, sentencers do not routinely obtain information about a women's domestic circumstances including whether they have children (Epstein, 2012; Farmer, 2019; Minson, 2017). Where mothers are incarcerated, 19 out of every 20 children are forced to leave their family home, yet local authorities do not collect routine data about the children of prisoners

(Prison Reform Trust, 2018). While in England, several non-governmental organisations provide services to these children, provision is patchy and funding has been reduced in recent years (Raikes, 2014).

Globally children with mothers in prison encounter similar problems (Dawson, Brookes, Carter, Larman & Jackson, 2013 ; Easterling & Feldman, 2017; Flynn, 2014; Knudsen, 2016; Roberts, 2012). As long ago as 1983, the children of prisoners were described as ‘forgotten victims’ (Matthews, 1983) and arguably this is still the case; there are no formal systems in place or consistent support offered to the children of prisoners (Ministry of Justice/DCSF 2007). Whilst the exact extent of children affected by maternal imprisonment remains unknown, the effects are reported to be significant and multi-faceted. For example, the risk of anti-social behaviour in young people is greatly increased (Murray & Farrington, 2008) and increased levels of poverty, family breakdown, substance abuse and mental health issues have been reported (Bellis, et al., 2016; Convery & Moore, 2011). Further, maternal imprisonment has been shown to have more negative effects upon attachment and psychological functioning than paternal imprisonment, indicating that the impact is more pronounced upon children (Murray & Murray, 2010). With many prisons situated at a distance from local communities this poses practical challenges for children visiting their mothers, including travelling long distances, the financial costs of travel, having no-one to accompany them and the security measures which can be intimidating for children (Arditti, 2003; McConnell and Raikes, 2018). The impact of child-parent prison contact varies depending on type of contact, age of child, demographic or family characteristic (Poehlmann, Runion, Weymouth and Burnson, 2019). The environment in which visits occur is central to the visiting experience; most prison visits take place in busy, noisy visiting halls where children cannot hug their mothers who have to remain seated across a table (Flynn, 2014; Authors, 2017). The lack of physical contact permitted in most prison visits, can be acutely painful for both children

and their mothers (Allen, Flaherty and Ely, 2010). This is compounded by the time-limited nature of typical visitation where children may not have sufficient opportunity to connect with their mother on an emotional level (Arditti & Few, 2006; 2008). Consequently, prison visits are often very emotional for children, and caregivers struggle to manage children's behaviour before and after visitation (Poehlmann, Sclafer, Maes & Hanneman, 2008). Child-friendly visits aim to mediate some of these difficulties by providing a,

positive, safe, friendly environment for visits, preparation for children prior to visiting, facilitating parent –child contact in between visits and supporting the parent (Poehlmann et al., 2019, p.505).

A review by Burgess and Flynn (2013) found visitation programmes that aim to support the mother–child relationship during a prison sentence have the capacity to foster and help sustain relationships, but there are few published long term effectiveness studies. Supportive interventions (including those which utilise family support workers) have been found to promote better relationships between families and the prison, but this is dependent on appropriate training, resourcing and support from prison staff and management (Burgess and Flynn, 2013; Loucks, 2005). Without these elements in place, these outcomes can be difficult to maintain. Negative outcomes are associated with contact which occurred in the absence of a supportive intervention (Poehlmann et al., 2010).

There are very few studies of visitation schemes which focus on and incorporate the experiences and views of children and even fewer that focus solely on the children of incarcerated mothers (Saunders, 2016). In their literature review of parent-child prison contact, Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper and Shear (2010) found that of the 13 studies that focused solely on incarcerated mothers, only four included the child's perspective. Flynn (2014) looked at adolescent children's experiences of visiting a mother in prison in Victoria, Australia concluding that more research is needed as to how to meet the needs of young people during

visitation and noted a need for further research in this area. Nesmith & Ruhland's (2008) study of 34 children, included only two of incarcerated mothers and highlighted the role of the caregiver in gate-keeping visitation. Saunders (2016) interviewed 16 children, three children with an incarcerated mother, and concluded that supportive interventions can meaningfully help build and maintain relationships between parents and children. Despite the growing body of evidence suggesting that properly facilitated and managed contact offers benefits to children and mothers, many children of imprisoned mothers are prevented from making contact with their parent because of practical considerations.

This paper presents findings from the evaluation of the Visiting Mum scheme which facilitates child-mother prison contact for children living in Wales whose mothers are currently serving sentences in Eastwood Park Prison. In doing so, the scheme assisted children who were experiencing emotional and practical difficulties as a result of their mother's incarceration and made a meaningful difference to their lives.

## **The scheme**

The Visiting Mum scheme was offered from 2014 to 2017 and was funded by the Big Lottery Innovation Fund, costing £168,000 per annum. The scheme supported women at one prison, HMP Eastwood Park in Gloucestershire, England and was designed to support mothers to maintain contact with their children, where it was in the child's best interests to do so. Co-ordinated by a national charity, the Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact), the scheme helped 164 children to make 292 visits to 97 mothers over the three-years of operation (for full details see Author et al., 2017). Only women who were living in South Wales at the time of their arrest were eligible. While on average women prisoners are held 60 miles from their home address, at Eastwood Park, 20% of women are held over 150 miles from home (HMP/YOI Eastwood Park, 2011) and within this number are many women from Wales. This creates huge difficulties

for children who are travelling further distances to the rural location of the prison, with no direct public transport available.

The Visiting Mum scheme works with female prisoners to facilitate contact with their children, supporting both mothers and their children throughout this process. The scheme is aimed at mediating the aspects of prison visits that children may find distressing (Beresford, 2018), including reduced security restrictions ( no security dogs and no visible members of uniformed staff in the visiting room), to promote better quality mother-child interactions (Sharratt and Cheung, 2014). Prison visits were tailored for children, less formal and provided more time (around two hours), space and privacy. Arts and crafts were available for the children, as well a play area with a wide range of toys, books, and activities for the children to enjoy with their mothers. Children and mothers were free to move around the space, and to access to an outside area directly adjacent to the visiting room. Kitchen facilities were available with hot food and drinks provided. Photographs were taken by Pact staff of the mothers and children together so both had a recorded memory of the event. The scheme is run by three workers based in the prison and a volunteer coordinator based in Wales. Volunteers were recruited and trained by a Welsh volunteer agency Sova (a charity supporting hard to reach individuals and their families) to work with children and their carer to prepare them for the first visit, and to transport them and their carer to the prison. Two families often travelled together, free of charge, either in a car with the volunteer or on a mini bus and shared the visiting room when they arrived at the prison. The workers also helped mothers record bedtime story books, so that the child could listen at home to their mother telling the story whilst following the book. This follows the Story Book Dads model (<https://www.storybookdads.org.uk>). Workers inside the prison supported mothers to make phone calls to children and facilitated family contact in

between visits, while volunteers maintained contact with the child and their carer between visits, offering support where required.

### **Study methodology**

The evaluation included a practitioner survey and analysis of Assessment, Care in Custody records (self-harm) and re-offending rates post-release. Interviews were undertaken with 24 professionals (including social workers in the community), prison staff (assistant governor, chaplaincy and resettlement worker), 17 mothers in prison, eight who had been released, and 12 children. This paper aims to give voice to children and draws solely on their data, gathered as part of a wider evaluation of the scheme (Author et al., 2017). In doing so it focuses on whether the scheme supported children to visit their mothers, how children perceived Visiting Mum visitation as compared to standard visits and the impact of the scheme on their relationship with their mother.

Participants were recruited by first asking mothers for consent for them and their children to participate in the evaluation. Children were then asked for an expression of interest and their consent using child-friendly information sheets (telling them that we were evaluating the Visiting Mum scheme) and consent forms; these were disseminated and explained by volunteers either in the prison during a prior visit or in the community. The data collection was undertaken outside of the Visiting Mum scheduled visits, as we did not want to take time away from visitation. Children may have chosen to take part in the study as it provided an additional opportunity to see their mother. When they arrived at the children were given time to spend with their mother before the research activity, and more time together after the research had taken place. The children brought their signed consent forms with them, and further confirmatory verbal agreement was sought. Focus groups lasted no more than one hour, in order to ensure that families were still able to have time together. Children were included if

they had visited their mother in prison at least once (to ensure it was not their first visit to the prison) and were excluded if they were below seven years of age, as they were deemed too young to understand what was being asked of them as many mothers do not explain to younger children about their imprisonment (Baldwin, 2015; Lockwood & Raikes, 2016). All children who expressed an interest, took part in the research. Age appropriate, creative method focus groups (Bagnoli, 2009) were employed with children. While all children were given the option of participating in an interview if they preferred, none accepted this offer. Mothers, workers from Pact and volunteers already known to the children were available during the research activities.

Participants were aged between seven and eighteen. Of the 12 participants, three took part in the seven to 11 year old activity group and seven in the 12 to 15 year old activity group. The two participants in the 16 to 18 age range were interviewed together in a local community office as both of their mothers had been released from custody. We utilised a range of creative activities, asking the children and young people to undertake a timeline collage regarding how they felt before, during and after a visit; we used miniature sandboxes for children to create a tableau depicting visiting their mother in prison (Mannay, 2016) and the drawing of eco maps to help us consider their support networks (Holland 2011). Such a mosaic approach has previously been described as best practice in participatory research with children and young people (Clark and Moss, 2001). Participants talked to the researchers as they actively created their work; we asked for permission to be able to record discussions about what they were making at the table. Once the child or young person had finished, we asked them to talk to us about their collages/sandboxes. With the 16-18 age group, we utilised some of the same creative exercises (McLaughlin, 20012).

All of the focus group activities with the young people were recorded and transcribed. Focus group and activity data was analysed using grounded analysis techniques with themes



cross checked by two members of the research team (Walliman, 2011). Photographs of the creative method outputs were used as tools of elicitation, rather than objects of analysis per se. Hence, they were used to illuminate and contextualise focus group findings. We found the eco maps particularly useful to help children talk about the closeness of their relationships, and to help understand who provided them with the most support.

### ***Ethics***

Ethical approval was gained from [name] University ethics committee and from the National Offender Management Service. As the research employed focus groups, where children met others in the same situation, the importance of confidentiality was discussed with each child before participation. Due to the sensitive nature of having a mother in prison, the research team were careful not to probe too deeply in order to allow each child to choose what they wanted to disclose.

### **Findings**

The findings are divided into six main themes of worry and parentification; secondary stigmatisation; surveillance and feeling unsafe; children's experience of the supported visits; relationships and navigating transitional and challenging situations.

#### ***Worry and parentification***

Most of the children described worrying about how their mother was and how she was coping with being in prison alone. In this regard children appeared to take on the caring role of the parent in a type of role-reversal, or parentification (Hooper, 2008).

This was particularly highlighted in the timeline collage undertaken, as the children described how they felt when waiting for a visit and reported the following: 'Needing to know

how mum is and just wanting to see her again', 'Anxious to see if mum is OK', 'Worried if mum is OK and not seeing her makes me sad', 'Worried about how she is coping alone' (Children's time line age 12-15).

In this account the terms 'worry' and 'anxious' are used interchangeably. However, while Weidberg (2017) adopts the term anxiety as it denotes uneasiness about an uncertain event, we have chosen to use the term worry as this relates to feeling anxious or fearful of actual or potential problems. There was a real sense that the sudden invisibility of their mother made young people feel the need to check on their mothers well-being, particularly at the beginning of the prison sentence. All the children reported feeling relieved as a result of seeing their mother, as otherwise they could only imagine how she was coping (and often imagined the worst). In this sense, the children took on the responsibility of worrying about their mothers in a type of reverse parenting, in that they perceived their mothers as vulnerable and needing support. The volunteers met with the children in the community to prepare them for the visit and discuss their worries. As children were accompanied to the prison by the volunteer, they were able to discuss any concerns that had arisen during the visit on their homeward journey. Volunteers also met with children in between visits and could address any on-going worries.

Visiting Mum staff in the prison provided support to mothers in the form of regular meetings, assisting with telephone calls to family and professionals, and arranging visits for the children, which helped women to feel less anxious and more in control. A young woman, Gemma (aged 17), expressed the relief she felt when seeing her mother during a Visiting Mum contact,

And then when the [Visiting Mum] visits started up and then she was like 'have a photo' and we're all there laughing and smiling and that was a lot of stress off me, because I know that she is happy that she has seen us.

Knowing that staff were providing support to their mother meant that children felt less worried about them. Providing a friendly environment where mothers had the space, time and resources to interact more naturally, helped to reduce children's worries concerning their mother's emotional well-being. Leeson and Morgan (2019) note that children often take on the role of carer for the parent remaining in the community, and as in this study parentification also extends to their mother in prison and younger siblings, as Gemma explained,

He was three or four at the time, and did not really understand the situation .. ...  
It effected him really bad.

As with Weidberg's (2017) interviews with five young people who had a parent in prison, the children were conscious of the financial costs of visiting prison. The Visiting Mum scheme provided transport free of charge for both the child and carer which alleviated children's worries regarding family finances,

We can like spend more time, so we just do these visits to save petrol and stuff  
(Seren, age 13).

Because money is tight (Paige, age 11).

Here, we can see that both Seren and Paige were keenly aware of the financial pressures on their carer, and felt responsibility for this. Hence, children described their worries concerning their mothers, siblings and carers' well-being. This mantle was not an expectation of the parent, but rather a role assumed by the young person borne out of an ethic of care for their mother and family (Tronto, 1994).

### ***Secondary stigmatisation***

The children often felt stigmatised by having a mother in prison and noted that in some respects children suffer more than their mothers from maternal incarceration. In this sense children of imprisoned parents have been described as hidden or invisible victims (Marshall, 2008). In addition to worrying about their mothers, children felt that the whole family's reputation had been tarnished. Such secondary stigmatisation has been described in relation to the families of those with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), (Salter et al., 2010). Catrin, aged 16 describes how both she and her sibling suffered secondary stigmatisation following their mothers incarceration,

Only because it's not the parents who are suffering- as well it is the kids... Yeah but she {mother} didn't get the backlash of it all, me and {my sibling} did. That's {the} thing... we was like the prisoners in our own home.... Yeah, we couldn't... when it all first kicked off- I couldn't go outside... Because like everywhere you'd go like even though it wasn't you that did it, you'd still get targeted for it.... You'd be walking down the street, 'oh your mother is a scum' (Catrin, age 16).

Catrin described feeling vulnerable by her mother being in prison, she felt judged by others, and very visible within her semi-rural community in Wales; this had a huge negative impact on her and her siblings. Some of the young people initially felt angry with their mother, as they were the ones left in the community and felt that they took the brunt of the societal repercussions for her offending and secondary stigmatisation by their association with her (Goffman, 1963). Coming from a rural home community has previously been noted as making women more visible, amplifying a sense of spoiled identity for incarcerated mothers (Easterling and Feldmeyer, 2017), but it is also more stigmatising for children, especially as they are having to deal with it day by day. This stigma left children finding it difficult to ask for help or talk to other people about their situation for fear of being judged (Dawson et al.,

2013; Gill & Morgan, 2013). Having the opportunity to talk to a volunteer who works regularly with children who have a mother in prison, made it easier for the young people to discuss their situation without fear of being judged. Similarly, being with other children in the same situation made them feel less singled out and isolated.

Children were asked to make sand box tableaux to demonstrate the difference between the standard visits and those organised by Visiting Mum. Seren (age 13) placed dozens of animals in the sand box to depict the standard visit, noting,

There's loads of people around, which is what the animals are.. being herded...

Here, Seren describes how being 'herded' with so many other people felt humiliating and disrespectful. The restrictions on their behaviour on a standard visit felt punishing and further stigmatising, as Gemma (age 17) notes 'You couldn't leave your chair or anything like that, like you couldn't give her a cwch (Welsh word for cuddle). Similarly, the surveillance made children feel uncomfortable,

You know there's prison guards in every corner, watching exactly what we are doing....it would be like quite uncomfortable because obviously they'd be dressed up in their uniform and they just stare at you. (Catrin, age 16 ).

It is to the impact of surveillance that we now move.

### ***Surveillance and feeling unsafe***

The children described feeling very unsafe in the austere and frightening setting of the prison when undertaking a standard visit. All of the children had visited the prison on a standard visit prior to engaging with the Visiting Mum project. Aaron, a young man, aged 13, utilised the sand box tableau to describe his experiences. When asked to explain the figures in the sandbox he stated,

The big orange thing in this corner is the guard, he's watching over you like a control. The pterodactyl just feels like you're always being watched and if you see the like in the corner that's just us three all close together because we can't really move around in here, we're stuck in one corner. ..all these little figures that are looking at us are because there's just so many people around and you always feel like you're being watched by everybody. .. like you don't feel as safe as you would with a { Visiting Mum} visit.

The sense of not feeling safe in a standard visit reverberated throughout the interviews, as the noise, crowds and the lack of space was experienced as frightening and intimidating. Several children noted the negative impact of the prison uniform and that they appreciated the Visiting Mum scheme for its lack of uniformed officers,

the freedom to walk around and feel safe. .. I don't like it when they are in their uniforms in there- it's horrible, it's like the police... the man sitting in there, the police. (Hugh, age 12)

Here the feeling of being watched and judged was exacerbated by the prison officers' uniforms and their similarity to police uniforms; this further contributed to feelings of stigmatisation. Other aspects of standard visits, for example, the sounding of alarms, created stress for the children. Catrin recalls times when an incident had occurred elsewhere in the prison,

And like if there is an incident they would all be like running away like they'd have to all run to the wings...The alarm would go off ...And everyone will be like [gasps].

Several of the children reported these types of incidents. Another young woman continues,

There was incidents ...and the guards would because they would be really short-staffed, the guards would have to clear the visiting hall. Sometimes the visits would be cancelled...It was very upsetting not so much for us, but Josh {her younger brother} would be questioning it then, Josh would get scared from the alarm... He was three or four then. (Gemma age 17)

Gemma appears to feel responsible for her younger brother and wanted to protect him. These types of incidents are both disturbing and demoralising for children who have travelled for hours to visit their mother.

### ***Children's experience of the supported visits***

The children all felt that the supported visits were far more enjoyable than standard visitation (Scharff- Smith, 2014). The visiting room utilised for the supported visits was airy and spacious, with an extensive range of toys and games provided. The children appeared comfortable and familiar with the family visiting room environment and we observed that they knew the layout of the room and ran to get the toys and craft materials from the cupboards and drawers with a sense of 'ownership' of the space; this increased their sense of confidence and helped them feel welcomed, as items had been provided especially for their use. The privacy afforded in the Visiting Mum contact was greatly appreciated by young people, especially when contrasted to the standard visit,

And it's a lot more private as well because ..because you can get used to people on the bus, they're sitting there as well and it's like better than sitting with like loads of complete randomers. (Aaron age 13)

Here Aaron notes the benefit of travelling with one other family who were familiar, rather than sitting in a large room of strangers. The privacy and space of the facility created what the children described as a sense of ‘intimacy’,

I love how intimate they are and how much freedom we have....it’s so much more relaxed (Sophie, age 14).

As well as a sense of intimacy, doing activities made the visits more natural and less stressful for the children, as Pearl simply says, “I like doing craft and making things with mum” (Pearl, age 7).

The children talked about their feelings whilst in the Visiting Mum contact when undertaking the timeline exercise, noting ‘Loving every second’, ‘Joyful and worth the wait’ ‘Seeing her makes everything better. Instantly puts a smile on my face’, (Children age 12-15). Some of the children went so far as to describe the Visiting Mum contact as ‘calming’ Sian (age 7) and ‘homely’ (Catrin, age 16),

Like the Visiting Mum ...is like more homely. And like you can like run and play and do what you want, more like you can then cwch {Welsh word for hug} each other like we was doing, free-spirited really like Mam could move anywhere she wants, do what she wants.

Interestingly, Catrin talks about her mother’s freedom to do what she wants, which seems of greater concern than her own wellbeing. When the young people arrived at the prison to take part in the focus groups, all immediately ran to hug and kiss their mothers. This echoes findings



in Weidberg's (2017) research which found that children can feel a lack of control and choice when they are prevented from hugging their parent in standard visitation.

Many authors have expressed concern regarding the aftermath of prison visits and the residual impact for children (Bartlett and Eriksson, 2018) and a reason many fathers choose not to see their children. This was explored in the time line exercise where young people were mixed in their responses, noting that they felt, "Sadness because I've left Mum but happy that I saw her", "After the visit I go home and wait until Mum rings and says when the next visit is" (Children age 12-15) and "Sad to leave her on her own, but she has put me in a great mood for the rest of the day" (Children 7-11).

Children reported that whilst they did feel sad at having to leave their mother, they did cope with their sadness and it did not detract from the pleasure and reassurance they had gained from seeing her. Following previous research (Poehlmann-Tynan, 2015) it was also important that young people were given the opportunity to say a proper goodbye. In some cases, women were able to walk their children back to the gate which children experienced as a more comfortable and reassuring departure,

It was hard saying goodbye however it was made easier as Mam was able to walk us to the gate. (Gemma, age 17).

### ***Relationships***

The young people noted how the Visiting Mum scheme helped to preserve and maintain their relationships with their mothers, which would have been very difficult to achieve without the supportive service,

Without Pact I wouldn't have a relationship with my mother (Sophie, age 14).

I love {Visiting Mum} visits because it means I can keep the close relationship with my mum.... I love my mum unconditionally. She means so much to me (Ffion, age 15).

Aaron too noted that the scheme helped to develop a stronger bond with mothers, 'Great help - allowed me to get a stronger bond' (Aaron, age 13).

From the children's perspective the scheme clearly helped to maintain relationships and moderate the impact of separation, for both their and their mother's benefit. This was achieved by having longer and more intimate visits which allowed for honest and open communication, rather than the stilted conversations of the standard visit, caused by sitting formally, across a table from their mother. The children noted that standard visits would have been difficult to maintain. It is however important not to see the experiences of children as homogeneous (Knudsen, 2016). Not all children had lived with their mother directly prior to incarceration as was the case with one of the older and one of the younger girls. Neither had they all necessarily enjoyed good relationships with their mother in the past. The scheme appeared to heal rifts and build bridges between mothers and children (Tasca, 2018) with all the children placing their mother at the centre of their eco map, indicating their most supportive relationship. Catrin noted that this had not always been the case as she had been angry with her mother. However, she states that the scheme helped bring them closer together,

I don't think we'd have a strong relationship with mam... I drifted from mam a lot, but then... .. Yeah. I don't hate {her}, I hate what {she} did... .. No. I probably wouldn't speak to her now. It's only through the Pact visits that I started speaking to her... it brought me and Sofia {sister} closer though (Catrin, age 16).

Thus, not only did Visiting Mum bring mother and child closer together it also had the potential to increase bonds between siblings where they were living separately but visiting together. Preserving relationships and healing rifts were vital for children to help mediate the impact of her incarceration, and could be important if and when they were to live together again.

#### *Relationships with other young people*

Children whose mothers are incarcerated can feel isolated but having contact with other children in the same circumstances was seen to be de-stigmatising and supportive (Beresford, 2018). The young people commented favourably on the joint visits which occurred with one other family and where the children travelled together, as it was an opportunity to meet others in the same situation, “You make a lot of friends as well” (Hugh, age 12), “Travelling is fun and I meet other people and make good friends” (Child age 12-15). The journey was made fun by having other children for company, there was a real sense that the children really enjoyed being together. In one of the focus groups the children mentioned that Megan had a beautiful voice and she promised to sing for the others in the bus on the way home; travelling together seemed to be a bonding experience. This togetherness did not necessarily involve talking about their experiences or feelings, but it allowed children to be open and not hide their situation (Dawson et al., 2013; Gill & Morgan, 2013). The opportunity to be open is vital as otherwise young people have few people they can confide in without feeling at risk of being judged (Coleman, Sykes and Groom, 2017).

#### *Relationships with volunteers*

The scheme was predicated up on the role of the volunteer to prepare and take the child and carer to the prison. The relationships with the volunteer had the potential to be highly significant to the children at a time when their mothers were not available, “Volunteers are awesome” (Paige, age 11). When asked what they valued in a volunteer the young people noted their thoughtful and respectful demeanour,

She’s just really nice.... and like she always talks to me in a nice voice  
(Aaron, age 13).

She makes me feel calm and welcome (Mia, age 9).

The volunteers are really nice because when you come on visits they make you feel like you’re one of their kids and they treat you with loads of respect (Hugh, age 12).

Being able to partake in the activities was also seen as an important quality in the volunteer,

She can make frogs, paper frogs (Pearl, age 7).

However, the volunteer was not always a consistent person, and one young person described having a different volunteer on each visit, whereas others had built up more of an on-going relationship with an individual, as was the original model for the Visiting Mum scheme. As Catrin (age 16) notes,

We have got a proper volunteer now, before we had different ones.

The volunteers served as good role models for the young people and for the mothers in prison who saw people freely giving their time to help others. The volunteers featured in eight of the nine eco maps that the children drew of their closest/supportive relationships. For one older child, the volunteer was situated in the first, most important circle of support, the

rest placed their volunteer in the second and third outer circles. The volunteer was clearly a significant support.

### *Navigating transitional and challenging situations*

The children we spoke to had experienced a range of challenging events during the period of their mother's incarceration, including puberty, pregnancy, birth of a child, gender reassignment and issues of sexual orientation, all of which require the attention and support of a significant adult, in most cases this is a mother (Prendergast, 2000). The scheme providing dedicated and private space, with more time for child-mother visits helped mothers to support children in navigating these difficult life transitions. One young person found she was pregnant at the age of 15 and used the time with her mother to prepare for this,

It helped a lot because my mother was young, she was young pregnant and I could speak to her relate sort of thing...(Catrin, age 16).

Three young people had continued to successfully engage with education and were preparing for college. Gemma, who was planning to go to university, had received dedicated time with her mother for consideration, deliberation and planning,

Well we were lucky because we had them visits every month so it was kind of the thing that we could talk to her about what we, like my big thing was going to college then getting ready then preparing to go to uni (Gemma 17).

The focus of the Visiting Mum visit was on choosing and preparing for Gemma's transition to higher education. The private, longer and more regular visits allowed for more focused and detailed planning. This was built upon during a period of release on temporary licence (ROTL) when she and her mother visited a university together,

Me and Mam, we talked about going to see unis and when she came out on ROTL we went to see Llanwrst University... (Gemma, age 17).

Rather than simply offering children a more accessible method of maintaining contact with their mother, the scheme enabled the continuation, or re-establishment, of meaningful family time, so mothers could be involved in the doing and planning of their children's lives..

### **Discussion and conclusion**

While this research is limited by a small sample of children captured at only one time point, it does nevertheless capture the rarely heard voices of children visiting a mother in prison. The impact of having a mother in prison has been known for many years (Matthews, 2003; Baroness Corston, 2007). However, changes in policy and practice for children have been slow to develop and support services are ad hoc or often non-existent. Children reported that the scheme mediated many of the difficulties they experienced visiting their mothers in prison, supporting findings from the wider literature. In particular, the scheme dedicated time to preparing children prior to the visit (Poehlmann et al., 2019), uniquely provided them with free transport, and longer, higher quality visits with access to activities and games (Arditti and Few 2006; 2008; Sharratt and Cheung, 2014). Additionally, the visiting room was far less intimidating with prison staff less visible (Sharratt and Cheung, 2014), as Catrin (age 16) notes 'Nobody is in uniform on Visiting Mum visits'. The children much preferred the supported visits, with more space for intimate interaction, 'I just like seeing mammy on my own' (Pearl, age 7). Whilst they found the standard visits extremely difficult to cope with as behaviour was very restricted 'You couldn't leave your chair or anything like that, like you couldn't give her a cwch (Welsh word for cuddle)' (Catrin, age 16). Had the Visiting Mum visits been put in place more quickly after sentence, the standard visit could have been avoided. The children perceived that the Visiting Mum scheme helped preserve and in some cases enhance child-mother relationships. Similarly, in one case it helped bring siblings closer together. Thus, some

of the disruption to family life was mediated. An unintended consequence of the scheme was bringing children together which, although potentially compromising confidentiality, was well received by children. It might be that support groups for children outside of visitation would be helpful for those who choose to take part. The children had many challenges to face but with this additional support demonstrated great resilience in responding to these (Hooper, 2008; Jones, Gallagher, Manby and Robertson, 2013; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2010). Older children, in particular, took on roles of responsibility, worrying about their mothers, younger siblings and carers. The role of the volunteer to support both carer and children had the potential to reduce the child's concern for the carer, and child-friendly visits reduced their concern for siblings. For all children the volunteer was a form of support and highly valued by young people 'they treat you with loads of respect' (Hugh, age 12). Young people benefitted from having a consistent volunteer although this was difficult to achieve; this should be prioritised in any future scheme. The evidence presented here strongly suggests that well-resourced, supported contact, with consistent staff or volunteers allocated to families and transport provided should be put in place and viewed as a right of the child.

The scheme was unique, simple, non-intrusive and did not pathologise children (Knudsen, 2016), but was supporting all children whose interest it was to visit, and practically helped children and carers to book visits and transport them to see mothers. It was embedded within the prison establishment, as has been found important with other prison initiatives (Burgess and Flynn, 2013; Loucks, 2005). Further, Visiting Mum was positively reviewed in the prison inspection and identified as a flagship programme (HMIP, 2017). The scheme was not continued after the Big Lottery Innovation funding ended, in part because no-one takes responsibility for this group of children, who are usually hidden and often fall between devolved social care and the UK prison service and because of lack of funding. It is vital that this group of children are no longer hidden and are identified prior to the point of a mother's

sentence. Court reports should include information about whether a woman has children, so planning can take place for the child to move to alternative accommodation and they can be provided with immediate assistance and early supported visitation should a custodial sentence be received (Morgan, Leeson, Carter Dillon, Wirgman & Needham, 2014). Identifying them as a distinct group of children in need of support (Leeson and Morgan, 2019) would help ensure that local authorities undertake to meet their needs. Specialist services such as Pact could then be commissioned to provide early support; this should be formalised in policy and practice.

Farmer (2019) has also illuminated the difficulties for mother and child contact and like Baroness Corston (2007), has recommended the use of residential women's centres based within communities. Clearly, should these be developed, Welsh women would be placed nearer to their families in more accessible child-friendly units, which would help women and children immensely. But until these are in place and even after, there will still be some women in prison and the evidence presented here alongside the existing literature base clearly supports policy for all women's prisons to have well-resourced, private, child-friendly visiting facilities, with appropriately-trained staff tasked to support children's visitation.

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